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ABSTRACT

Role-playing is proposed as an ideal technique to teach language because it prepares learners for the unpredictable nature of real-life communication, teaches appropriate language use, and boosts self-confidence. Theories that have paved the way for the current communicative approach to language teaching are reviewed, role-playing is defined, and the rationale for role-playing is outlined, focusing on its effectiveness in the areas noted above. It is argued that role-playing prepares learners for realistic communication, adding emotion, inventiveness, and listener awareness to language teaching. It also contextualizes language use and exposes the student to conversational routines and cultural discussion. Finally, role-playing gives students instant evidence of the success of their language usage, fosters retention, and stimulates involvement in a relatively risk-free environment. It is suggested that the technique be used often, alongside other language teaching techniques, and with variation. Specific classroom procedures for introducing and implementing role-playing are outlined, and several sample activities are described. Contains 25 references. (MSE)

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Teaching Language Realistically: Role Play is the Thing

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Running head: ROLE PLAY

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Abstract

This paper proposes role play as an ideal technique to teach language as it is because it prepares learners for the unpredictabilities of real-life communication, teaches appropriateness, and boosts self-confidence. The opening looks back at some theories that paved the way for the current communicative approach to second language teaching, states the purpose of the paper, and defines role play. Then follows a thorough discussion of why role play is considered the thing. Next, the paper takes a practical procedural strategy, answering questions such as when to use role play and how to do it. In addition, it provides a couple of examples. Some final remarks close the body of the paper and conclude that through role play teachers arm students with courage to face the world outside the classroom, helping them to cross the bridge towards communicative competence.

Teaching Language Realistically: Role Play is the Thing

In the not too distant past, second language teaching was synonymous with teaching grammar, describing structures, repeating sentences deprived of meaning, memorizing endless lists of vocabulary and rules. These procedures reflect an associationist stimulus-response approach to language teaching, in which language is considered a rigid set of vocabulary and structures, artificially put together, and in which the mind takes no part. Nevertheless, several factors have combined to change the face of second language teaching: Chomsky's work in the field of psycholinguistics, the development of cognitive pshychology, and lately, the urge to communicate. Chomsky insists on the fact that human language is essentially innovative and stimulus-free (1964). To put it simply, language is a creative process, and the mind has a unique way of doing things. Going even further back in time, by 1916 De Saussure defined langue as opposed to parole or language use, establishing a fundamental dichotomy which was accepted by many linguists, from Bloomfield to Chomsky (Salverda, 1985). The Prague School defined language as a flexible, adaptable, context modifiable system (Schnelle, 1983 [cited in Salverda, 1985]), supporting the functional aspect of language. Similarly, the American structuralists (Bloomfield, Sapir, Whorf et. al.) contributed enormously to the interdisciplinary study of language, relating it to culture and society. In summary, language is an exceedingly

complicated system (Rivers & Melvin, 1977). Each utterance, no matter how small, can be perceived differently, by the same individual, at different moments, and in different contexts. The same cue elicit an array of responses. For instance, a hand held out may elicit a hand held out in response, and Good to see you, or conversely, a brusque movement, and Get yourself a job! (Rivers & Melvin, 1977). Therefore, in language there is no simple 1 : 1 correspondence (Salverda, 1985), but plurarity of meaning, and the mastery of the mechanics of language does not ensure the ability to use it for communication. Consequently, in the last ten years, a communicative syllabus, stressing meaning, concentrating on context, creativity, tasks, and hands-on activities became the major trend in second language teaching. And the greatest challenge L_2 teachers face is to enable students to function outside the classroom, teaching language as it is, not as it reads in the texbooks.

An ideal technique to encourage students to talk the real language is role play (Maley & Duff, 1982; Marinelli, 1983; Siskin & Spinelli, 1987; Snyman & De Kock, 1991). It can take several forms: simulation, problem-solving, creative-thinking, discussions, and so forth. Because every one of these activities involves asking learners to imagine that they are themselves or another person in a particular situation, in this paper, I will consider them all as role play: The spontaneous, creative simulation of real-life activities, in which the entire class participates. Besides, some

authors also consider drama a part of role play. I will not. Drama does not involve spontaneity: It focuses on roles, plots, and dialogues written down in play form to be memorized and acted out, or read aloud (Richard-Amato, 1988). In role play there are no scripts.

Why it is the thing

The virtues of role play have been listed by several authors. This paper will consider it an ideal technique to teach language because it prepares learners for the unpredictabilities of real-life communication, teaches them to be appropriate, and boosts their self-confidence.

Preparing learners for real-life communication.

We are all very much familiar with the expressionless and faceless people of L_2 textbooks. Mr. Smith and Mme. Vincent never disagree, nor disapprove, and are never surprised (Maley & Duff, 1982). That is not exactly what happens in everyday life. People have different opinions and know different things (Golebiowska, 1988). "The people we meet are busy, irritable, worried, flustered, tired, headachy; their breath smells, their armpits itch, food gets stuck between their teeth; they have quirks and tics and mannerisms, they speak too slowly or too fast, repeat themselves or lose the thread . They are not necessarily interesting but they are alive" (Maley & Duff, 1982, p. 7). Role play prepares learners for such unpredictabilities, adding emotion, inventiveness, and awareness of the listener to language teaching.

It adds emotion building disagreement into the tasks (Golebiowska, 1988), and teaching students suprasegmental and paralinguistic features of the target language. In real life we never know the reaction our listeners will have. Thus, to imitate real life, it is important to maintain the unexpectedness, building disagreement either through information gaps or conflicting views. For example, in one of the several activities Golebiowska (1988) proposes, the father cannot disclose the real reason for not wanting to go to the bakery -- he has a girlfriend who works there (Bread, p.70). In another instance, one of the participants doesn't like to talk, but is also incapable of saying so; then he speaks in flat monosyllables (On The Train, p. 83). Furthermore, intonation and body movements are also essential parts of our daily language. That is how people demonstrate they are angry, bored, or happy. The word ready, for example, can convey several meanings: It can mean are you ready?; it can mean hurry up! Aren't you ready?; or yes, I am ready. At the OKTESOL Conference (Nov' 1992), I saw a tape in which the student took the role of a customer who in vain tried to get back his TV from the repair shop. He would say: "Either you give me my TV right now, or I will call the police." The words were articulated with equal emphasis, with no opposition between important and background information. After the enactment, the class discussed how successful the role play was. All agreed there was something missing. This thing was intonation, realism.

An angry customer would never use that emotionless voice. The teacher worked with the student so that his speech (through correct intonation) reflected his mood and intentions (Quisenberry, 1992). The student finally articulated "Either you give me the TV RIGHT now, or I will CALL the POLICE," slamming the table. Both suprasegmental and paralinguistic features were correctly used.

Role play also adds inventiveness to language lessons, allowing students to think at higher cognitive levels. They experiment with words and structures, venturing into the unknown, and testing hypothesis about the target language. This comprises the basis for projected expectancies and informed guessing (Rivers & Melvin, 1977). Everybody knows what it is to be lost for words, and inventiveness enable speakers to manage without the exact word, through paraphrase.

In addition, role play makes students aware of the listener. During the day our roles are constantly shifting. At one moment we are teachers, at another mothers and fathers, at another students, at another customers. The vocabulary, intonation and behaviour patterns we use vary according to the role we take. And the role changes because the listener changes. Duff and Maley (1982, p. 11) give an example in which a dentist changes role consecutively: "He might say to the nurse, I want you to X-ray the lower left side, few seconds later to the patient, Would you mind putting your head back a little further?, and a few seconds later

to a patient who is a boy of eight, Come on now, put your head back." So, minding our listeners is part of our routine, and role play gives students a chance of doing the same, in the safe environment of the classroom. In plain language, through role play students learn to speak the target language as real people, not as robots who reproduce emotionless textbook dialogues.

Teaching appropriateness.

Language forms can only take meaning when they enter a particular context. As mentioned in the introduction, there is no fixed meaning to every form, but a variety of meanings to every form. Sensitively choosing the right word to convey a target meaning is an extremely difficult task for a second language speaker: It involves culture background and conversational routines they do not know. Role play provides that knowledge, teaching students to be appropriate through language contextualization, conversational routines, and culture discussions.

Contextualization of language has to do with presenting language as a whole, in a situation, not chopped up in parts, encouraging students to go behind the words and structures and onto the action. For instance, if the word stop is taught individually, students might decide to use it to ask for interruption in a conversation. Nevertheless, if they are provided with conversational input in which the word stop occurs, they will learn that there is a difference between stop and asking for interruption. They will

articulate Hold on just a minute, and not Stop talking for a minute. While there is nothing grammatically wrong with such an utterance, it is not appropriate (Siskin & Spinelli, 1987). Appropriateness means knowledge and control of the sociolinguistic code, which can only be provided if the teacher embeds language in context.

As far as conversational routines are concerned, role play furnishes inumerous instances -- "in an airplane" to teach how to initiate a conversation, how to be evasive, how to talk about ordinary facts (as the weather, for example); "in a library" to practice how to ask for information, how to ask for help; as well as other situations in which students learn how to introduce themselves, how to express exasperation, how to ask for advice, how to ask a question, how to be formal, and so on. The knowledge of these routines helps students behave naturally, lending a sense of fluency to speech, even when the command of the linguistic code is weak (Siskin & Spinelli, 1987). Namely, through role play students learn to say Pleased to meet you, I don't think we've met before, I'm afraid not, what a charming dress!, excuse me, sorry, don't worry, lovely day, isn't it?, that's all right, you know, well, let me see... appropriately!

I would also like to add that role play is an optimal means to discuss culture sensitively. Language is closely connected to culture. Whenever a person starts to learn a second/foreign language, he/she is ultimately learning the culture of the people who speak that language (Hung, 1983).

Communication is only possible if there is knowledge of the culture behind the language. By that I mean, knowing the life style, customs, beliefs, and interaction patterns of a people. For example, Americans tend to observe time very carefully (Spanish people don't). Greek people start speaking in a high pitch to denote politeness (English speakers won't hear that politeness!). Japanese people mark gender through pitch (women use high pitch, men do not). Furthermore, the language styles we acquire when children are culturally appropriate to roles we see being played. We nurture them along a life-time. As pointed out by Salisbury (1970), when children play House, Doctor, or School, they use the attitudes, gestures, and customs of people in those roles, rehearsing the language expectations for roles they will play as adults, and incorporating the mainstream culture. Therefore, as one moves from one language to the other, one must also move his/her perception of reality (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis). Otherwise, there is no understanding. And by observing, listening and participating in interactions in which the culture patterns of the target language are present, students tend to internalize them.

To take the case of the American culture, if Japanese male students role play their way to English, they will have opportunities to learn that they can use high pitch without affecting their masculinity. Greek students will notice that they don't need to scream to show politeness.

Spanish students will learn that they must try to observe time. They would all have opportunities to learn to respect differences and to become more tolerant of others. Summarizing, role play teaches students to be appropriate because it contextualizes conversational routines according to the target culture.

Boosting self-confidence.

As widely recognized by the majority of research studies and language teachers, the outgoing, talkative student is a more successful second language learner (Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1975; Naiman, Forhlich, Stern, and Todesco, 1978; Oller, 1977; Brown, 1988; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Personality and affective factors are among those variables that produce attainment in a language, influencing the degree to which language input becomes intake. Furthermore, as stated by Brown (1988), self-confidence is probably the most pervasive aspect of any human behavior. No cognitive activity can be carried out without some degree of self-confidence. The belief in one's own capabilities. The more a learner is self-confident, the more rapid will be his or her progress and proficiency in the second language (Oller, 1977). Role play can do that: It boosts self-confidence because it gives students an instant evidence of success, fosters retention, and stimulates involvement in a risk-free environment.

To begin with, students are asked to act an interview for a job, or a difficult negotiation with a customer, not only to talk about it. Therefore,

they have immediate feedback on the effects of their actions (Van Ments, 1983). It is a nowness that is tied to the future (Snyman & De Kock, 1991). Also, they attain practical experience, rehearsing skills they will need in real life, in the safety boundaries of the classroom. For example, shopping for clothing, setting up an appointment, renting a house.

Next, role play conjugates words and actions, fostering retention. At this point, it is most appropriate to recall the Chinese tenet I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand. Students feel extremely confident when they suceed in remembering and using a word comprehensibly. Through role play they see language in operation, and they act it.

In addition, role play addresses the needs and concerns of the learners. They are the ones who control content and pace (student-centered), taking responsibility for their own learning, developing autonomy and skills in learning-how-to learn (Nunan, 1989). The teacher no longer teaches, but organises, sets up activities and monitors them discreetly (Golebiowska, 1988). Similarly to a conductor of an orchestra: conduct but not play. Actually, each invidual student feels that he/she has a valid contribution to make (Maley & Duff, 1988). The realization that, though relatively unskilled in the target language, they are able to control learning is an incredible morale-booster. Also, role playing lends a sense of belonging, there is me in the experience. I am making it

happen (Maley & Duff 1982; Snyman & De Kock, 1991). This situation is relevant and interesting to me, personally.

And finally, role play stimulates involvement because it is highly motivating, promoting what Krashen (1985) considers the ideal environment for input to become intake. The focus is on communication, and errors are seen as learning devices, tools to investigate the unknown and experiment with newly acquired language. Consequently, there is no anxiety about generating error-free utterances. Students feel comfortable and free to behave naturally.

In conclusion, as widely advocated by Maley & Duff (1983 & 1989), Golebiowska (1988), Dunan (1989), Brown (1988), Oller (1988), Snyman & De Kock (1991), Marinelli (1983), Davies (1991), and many others, role play is an ideal technique to enable students to cross the bridge from controlled utterances to complete communicative autonomy: It adds "conflict" to classroom activities; it teaches appropriateness, conversational routines, and cultural differences in context; it boosts self-confidence, getting students involved in real-life communication about interesting, relevant subject matters, in a relaxed learning environment. Therefore, if teachers want students to succeed in the quest to acquire a second language, they should provide them opportunities to create within the second language, reproducing the natural environment in which people live and interact.

When to use it

After studying the advantages of role play, the teacher will probably ask when to use it. I would say as often as possible, and as long as it does not dominate learning to the exclusion of other teaching techniques. As agreed upon by many authors (Hung, 1983; Marinelli, 1983; Maley & Duff 1982), role play is a supplementary activity to be used in conjunction with others, eclectically. "Teachers must not employ them without considering course content, or the class would be nothing more than fun and games" (Hung, 1983, p. 112). Furthermore, given enough imagination, it is possible to devise a role play to every kind of second language classroom (vocabulary, listening comprehension, conversation, grammar, composition) and to accomodate it to varying levels of proficiency (beginners, intermediate, advanced), purposes (Quisenberry, 1992; Van Ments 1983). Namely, the teacher can use it to: (a) Introduce new language (this type of role play is task oriented and extremely useful to teach survival language -- the teacher avails of all sorts of visual aids to convey meaning); (b) teach a target structure (be it sounds, words, or syntactic structures -- this type of role play aims at accuracy); (c) teach expression (this type of role play emphasizes the target language sociolinguistic code: How to express disappointement, sadness, agreement, surprise, and so on); (d) review a unity (it aims at reinforcing concepts covered during a unity of study); (e) stimulate writing (students

can write a report, a critique, or a simple transcription of the dialogue generated).

How to do it

As claimed by Van Ments (1983), there are good and bad ways of using role play. However, when at its best, its an enjoyable and exciting experience, which will be seen as an essential part of learning, rather than a mere entertainment (Van Ments, 1983). In order to obtain the best results, plan to succeed. But structuring should not dominate the teaching experience: Role play is supposed to be simple, flexible, and not to require much preparation both on part of the teacher and learner (Quisenberry, 1992). Therefore, what follows are general guide-lines to help teachers in preparing to succeed, combining the ideas of Van Ments (1983), Marinelli (1983), Maley & Duff (1982), and Quisenberry (1992):

1. Introduce role play and show its advantages on the very first day of class.

2. Develop the ideas, warming-up through drama, exercises with thematic vocabulary (it can be oral drilling, or matrices to be filled in), and mime (it fixes language in the minds of the students [Davies, 1990]). Don't put much time into this phase. Remember, it seems to work best with a minimum of structure.

3. Assign roles. Role-cards with written cues are very helpful (mainly for beginners and intermediate students). It is up to the teacher to

use them or not. But make sure that there is a role to every student in the classroom, that they are grouped multiculturally (to avoid their falling back into the native language), and that they don't reveal the role-card to anyone. As suggested by Golebiowska (1988), there are three rules to be emphasized when assigning roles: (a) Don't show your role-card to anyone; (b) don't reveal all the information at once; (c) speak the target language.

4. Rehearse in pairs or small groups (assign 10 minutes). The classroom will be noisy and busy.

5. Perform in the classroom (every group should have a turn). Actual performances before audiences are not the objective. Role players should only be concerned with themselves, the other role players, and the spontaneous generation of language. It is acting for the sake of language learning, exclusively.

6. Debrief. Give students 10 minutes, immediately after the enactment itself, to criticize the interactions, based on the difficulty and authenticity to create spontaneous language: Was it successful? Why/why not? How was it constructed? Could it be improved? How?

7. Evaluate performances. Make sure they know they will be graded for the easiness in generating language.

8. Address difficulties in the following lesson, as a follow-up.

Moreover, as the aim is to provide am optimum environment for learning the real language,we should not force students into undesirable roles. After some initial surprise, students generally find the activity both engaging and challenging, and are willingly to cooperate. If some are reluctant or shy, work in a one-to-one basis, until they feel comfortable and relaxed to take part with the whole class. Besides, take in consideration that in a classroom there are always one or two difficult students who don't cooperate, and that it is much easier to control them in a role play situation, than in a traditional class (normally, the group itself takes care of the problem [Maley & Duff, 1982]). Also, do not interrupt the activity to correct errors. As put by Savignon (1978 [cited in Hung, 1983]), if you are not a native speaker, chances are you make them. So, relax, and only intervene if students ask you to. Finally, it is important to set guide-lines for feedback: it is intended to be positive and to focus on language generation, not on individuals. For those with access to video taping equipment, it is a helpful way of critiquing the scenario. There will be no questions as to who said or did what, when, or how.

Suggestions

Everyday life can be easily translated into a role play. The teacher and the students, with their inventiveness and life experience, and with the help of local newspapers, TV adds, magazines, telephone directories,

cartoons, can devise numerous situations. The more the activity relates to the learners' own experience, the more "real-life" it becomes (Golebiowska, 1988). Below some examples[1] intended to function as models:

In a Restaurant (for 2 students).

(A) You just saw a waiter in your section repeatedly spill food on different customers. It is your turn to order. You are hoping someone else will come to help you, or that he will go off work very soon. Politely, be evasive and avoid ordering.

(B) You are the waiter. You have a terrible headache and are even running a fever. But you still have to hang on for three more hours. You need the money to pay your tuition. Do your best, and take the orders.

Language features being practiced: how to be evasive (e.g. no, not really; not right now; I don't know yet); serving a customer and being persuasive (Are you ready to order? May I help you? We have wonderful options in the menu, for example...)

Talking on the telephone (for two or more students).

(A) You work at the circulation desk of a library. There are many books overdue since last Fall, and you have to call up each student to inform the fine and ask for the return of the book. Be assertive and make sure the student promise to meet your requirement.

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[1]Except for the third role play, the others are ideas adapted from Saylor (1983).

(B) You are the student. You got a book at the library last Summer, and you lost it. If the librarian calls you, try to put her off. But don't mention you lost the book.

(C) You are the student. You got a book at the library last Fall, and your dog teared it to pieces. You don't have money to pay the fine. You are out of a job. Try to put the librarian off. But don't mention what happened to the book, nor that you won't pay the fine.

Language features being practiced: Routines to talk on the phone (Can I speak with...please? I wonder if I could speak with ...please. This is he/she. I'm afraid he/she is not in at the moment); how to be evasive; how to be persuasive.

In a cocktail party (for two or more students).

(A) You just arrived in town and know hardly anyone. Your company is sponsoring a cocktail party to celebrate the Fourth of July. You can't miss it. You love to socialize. Talk to as many people as possible, making yourself at home.

(B) You are an introvert who hates social events. Your spouse is the social director of Tisch Co., and they are sponsoring a cocktail party to celebrate the Fourth of July. As you hate to be insensitive or rude, you go. Dismiss whoever tries to engage in conversation with you.

Language features being practiced: How to introduce oneself (I think we haven't met before; May I introduce myself); how to engage in a

conversation (lovely party, isn't it? It looks like it is going to rain, don't you think so?); and how to dismiss a conversation politely (Excuse me, but I need to find my spouse, etc.).

At school (two or more students).

(A) You are a teacher. A student will approach you asking for an extension on a long-term assignment. This is the third time this year he has asked for more time. Refuse to give it to him/her this time.

(B) You are a student. Give excuses to your teacher for not completing a long-term assignment. You got pneumonia and had to lay in bed for 15 days. Try to get an extension. You know it will be difficult because it is your third time. But now you have a strong reason.

Language features being practiced: how to apologise (I"m terribly sorry, but...; I wonder if you could...); how to refuse to help (I'm afraid I can't help you this time; I'd really like to help but...); how to be persuasive.

At a friend's house (for two students).

(A) You invited a friend to stop by. Your house is full of precious antiques and art objects and you are extremely picky about your things. Your friend brings her child over, and you are not at all happy with that. The child is a devil on wheels. Express your aggravation and concern.

(B) A friend invited you to stop by. He/she doesn't like to have children around, but your baby-sitter didn't show up, and you had to take your child with you. You don't seem to be too concerned because after

all, your child is a little angel, although a bit active. And besides, "children are always children," they mean no harm. Convince your friend that she has no need to worry. The child won't touch a thing!

Language features being practiced: How to express disagreement (I'm rather worried about... You don't seem to realize that...); how to reassure somebody (You don't need to worry; don't get impatient; there is no need to be upset...).

Final Comments

Speaking is as much a natural and spontaneous activity as role play is a natural human behavior. Therefore, second language teachers who want students to speak the second language realistically should draw upon the imitation of reality by using role play. In doing this, they will give students the chance to take responsibility for their own learning. In addition, by using role play teachers will encourage adaptability, fluency, and confidence on the part of the students. The point I am trying to stress is that teachers can arm language learners with courage to face the world outside the classroom (Davies, 1991), and cross the bridge toward communicative competence if they use role play.

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